

I Won This Thing

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Summary: A simple mishap changes the course of events, and Astrid wins in dragon training. But her victory is hollow, and only drags her into an even bigger mess.

1. Chapter 1

I Won This Thing Chapter 1

The Gronckle flew around the perimeter of the training ring, looking for someone to shoot at. It had taken five shots already, and four targets had left the ring in varying stages of shock and pain. The dragon's first shot had been aimed at Astrid and was a total miss. Fishlegs was the first to be ejected, his shield blasted into smoldering fragments. The twins had dodged a shot, but when they came back together to blame each other for almost getting hit, a follow-up shot had hit both their shields at once. Snotlout had tried to jump over a fireball, but it hit at his feet and set his boots on fire. He had hot-footed it out of the ring in record time. The dragon had one shot left.

There were two targets left, Hiccup and Astrid. The crowd was openly rooting for Hiccup, who had somehow become quite successful in the ring. He never struck a dragon with his weapon, but he knocked them out as they came to him. No one quite knew how he did it. He made it look easy; most of the time, he didn't even seem to care. But there was no arguing with results. When he began dragon training, few would have bet a copper on his survival, but now Hiccup was well on the way to winning the grand prize – the chance to kill a Monstrous Nightmare in front of the whole village.

That was intolerable to Astrid. When they started, she was the front-runner; everyone expected her to win. Her chances were snatched away from her by Hiccup, the most unlikely competitor she could have imagined. Now, everyone was talking about Hiccup; everyone in the

Great Hall wanted to sit with Hiccup; and unless she could turn this thing around, Hiccup would be the village hero at the end of the day. There was no way this son of a half-troll, rat-eating munge-bucket was going to outdo Astrid Hofferson!

Hiccup had taken cover behind one of the low wooden obstacles that littered the training floor. Astrid dropped next to him, watching the Gronckle flying around the ring. She suddenly realized who she was sitting next to. She angrily shoved his shield to the ground and ordered, "Stay out of my way! I'm winning this thing!"

"Good! Please, by all means," Hiccup stammered as she leaped for a better position. Killing a dragon was the last thing he wanted to do. Well, no; disappointing his father would be really bad, and so would making Astrid mad. He watched her go, then looked up and saw his father watching him. He was struck by an unpleasant thought: whether I win or lose, someone I care about is going to be mad at me today_.

Astrid leaped, rolled, and hopped the length of the ring, keeping the fat dragon in sight. It kept circling; it didn't see her. She worked her way back, stopped to catch a quick breath, and said out loud, "This time! This time, for sure!" She leaped over the obstacle, unleashed her battle cry, and hopped over the very last obstacle.

But something went wrong. She never figured out what she did wrong. But her toe caught the obstacle and she fell flat on the stone floor; her axe flew out of her hand and slid away from her.

The sound of the axe hitting the floor distracted the Gronckle, which was headed for Hiccup. It turned and charged at her instead; it meant to bite, not to breathe fire. She scrambled to her feet, leaped across the floor, rolled, and picked up her axe. In her haste, she grabbed the handle wrong; when she swung, she hit the dragon with the flat of the blade instead of the edge. But desperation lent strength to the blow. The Gronckle's eyes rolled back in its head, and it plopped senseless to the ground.

Astrid turned her blade and wound up for a follow-up strike, but it wasn't needed. The dragon was down and the game was over. She'd done it! Hiccup saw it fall and heaved a sigh of relief.

Stoick announced that the Elder had decided who the final winner was. Hiccup tried to sneak out of the ring, as he had so often done. "So... later!" he excused himself. Gobber caught him and held him back. Astrid decided that Hiccup was not leaving early this time; he would stay here and face his failure and her triumph.

"I'm kind of late for â€" he again tried to sneak away. She caught him within the points of her axe.

"What?" she asked in a silken voice that signaled danger. "Late for what, exactly?" He didn't get the chance to answer. Gobber stood between them â€" nervous Hiccup and confident Astrid â€" and held out his hook-hand over Astrid's head.

The elder smiled and pointed! "You've done it!" Gobber shouted. "You've done it, Astrid! You get to kill the dragon!" Their friends surrounded them and celebrated; the twins did a head-bump that nearly

knocked Tuffnut senseless. They raised Astrid up onto Fishlegs' shoulders and paraded her around the ring, to the cheers of the crowd. Hiccup was left standing where he was. He looked up just in time to see his father's back, stalking dejectedly away.

That night, in the Great Hall, everyone wanted to sit near Astrid and tell her how awesome she was. Hiccup wound up in the place he knew so well, eating at a table by himself, alone and unnoticed. "Welcome back to the Land of the Nobodies," he said to the empty seats. "It's like I never even left." At least he now had a friend, a real friend, but he couldn't bring that friend into the Great Hall. His real friend had four legs and scales. His other so-called friends would kill him on sight.

He tried to sneak upstairs to his room afterwards, but his father heard him. "Hiccup, let's talk." _Oh, great; this always ends well_.

"They told me you were doing so well in the ring! What happened?"

"I don't know, Dad. It was headed right for me, I was all set to take it down, and all of a sudden it turned around and went after Astrid instead."

"Son, the whole time when I was at sea, looking for the dragons' nest, I was thinking about you and hoping you were doing well. When I got back and heard from Gobber that you were winning in dragon training, I could not have been more proud! I only wish..."

Yeah, I know what you wish, Hiccup thought. _You wish, for once in your life, you could have seen me do something right. Sorry, Dad, I guess you got the wrong offspring_.

"Well, maybe next year," Stoick went on. "You've had a busy day. Go on upstairs."

2. Chapter 2

****I Won This Thing**** Chapter 2

Astrid slowly walked to the center of the ring, where the racks of shields and weapons were set up. She carefully set a shield on her left arm, and ignored the weapons; she had brought her trusty axe with her, and didn't trust anything else. Not for something as important as this. Today she would kill a Monstrous Nightmare and become a full-fledged warrior in her tribe.

Most of the village was gathered around the training ring. Her teen-age friends were in a group above the door, shouting, "Give it to him!" "Show 'em how it's done!" Hiccup stood by himself a few feet away, looking detached and mournful. "Be careful, Astrid," he said quietly.

Aside from Astrid, he was the only one who knew how conflicted she was. She had been annoyed that he hadn't stayed around to celebrate her victory yesterday, and she'd followed him to see where in the Nine Worlds he kept sneaking off to, after every training session. It had taken her a while to get away from her fans, though. When she followed his tracks, they led to an isolated cove that was filled

with... no. Not that. Dragon tracks! They weren't a familiar kind of dragon, but they couldn't be anything else. There was no sign of Hiccup. Had he been carried off?

From overhead, she heard something that sounded like Hiccup's voice. Overhead? Yes, a dragon had carried him off, and now he was fighting for his life! She saw the jet-black bat-like shape, heard Hiccup's cries coming from... wait, a jet-black shape? Was it a... a Night Fury? What else could it be? And it was taking Hiccup away! What could she do? She couldn't throw her axe that far. But she could tell the village; maybe they could do something. She left the cove at a run.

Above them, Hiccup saw Astrid in their cove, saw her look up, then saw her leave. She'd seen Toothless! While he was riding him! "Dat da-dah, we're dead," he sang to his dragon. Toothless snorted and went into a shallow dive.

He caught Astrid in mid-stride and carried her up into the air. She clung to his paw in panic, then let go when she realized it was a dragon's paw, then clung to it again when she realized how high off the ground she was. It deposited her in the highest branches of a tall pine, then landed there and glared at her.

Then came the bizarre dialog in the top of the tree, the cautious climbing onto the dragon's back, the wildly spinning ride that ended only when she cried "I'm sorry," and the hours-long wordless romantic flight through the clouds. By the time they were done, Astrid had done something she almost never did â€" admit she was wrong. She had found a dragon that was good for something besides killing. She also understood how Hiccup had become so good in dragon training. He wasn't learning from another warrior; he was learning from a dragon!

But then came the aerial detour into the heart of the mountain, the dragons' nest, the home of a dragon whose head was bigger than her house. Now she and Hiccup knew why the dragons attacked â€" they had to feed this giant or be eaten alive. Knowing all this, and having to keep it a secret, was a heavy burden.

But she had to set all that aside for now. The wooden doors creaked and flew open, and a flaming monster burst into the training ring. It ran around the walls and onto the ceiling chains, looking for some way out, before it noticed her. It dropped to the floor and focused its huge eyes on her.

Now the real conflict began. It was as though two parts of her were arguing inside her head. One spoke with the voice of Stoick, and the other, the voice of Hiccup.

Stoick shouted, "Kill it! It's what the whole village expects! Fulfill your destiny and become a true Viking!"

Hiccup argued, "It attacks us only because it has to. It doesn't deserve to die for that."

Stoick: "It's a killer! It has probably killed many of us already! Killing is all it's good for, so kill it!"

Hiccup: "It's intelligent. It can be trained. It might even be

friendly if we let it. We can do better things with dragons than killing them."

Stoick: "You have spent your entire life getting ready for this moment. Don't let false sentiment ruin your future!"

Hiccup: "You know the truth, Astrid. You can't hide from that. You know it's wrong to kill this dragon."

Suddenly, the dragon settled the debate with a blast of fire. Astrid got her shield up in time to stop it, but the Nightmare's liquid fire stuck to the shield and set it ablaze. She had to throw it aside before it burned her arm, and now she had no shield.

The dragon lunged at her; she screamed and ran. It snapped at her twice and missed, but not by much. In a few seconds, it would have built up enough fire for another shot, and that would be the end of her. People in the crowd were shouting clever suggestions, like "Run!" But only one of them actually did anything.

Hiccup had to act â€" Astrid was in danger! He wiggled between the bars of the ring's ceiling and dropped to the floor of the ring. It was a twelve-foot drop, and when he landed, he turned his left ankle painfully. _What a stupid, useless, typically Hiccup thing to do_, he thought. But he hobbled to the center of the ring, grabbed the nearest shield, and lobbed it at Astrid with all his might. It was a weak, wobbly throw; if she hadn't been running towards it, it never would have reached her. But it did, just barely. She leaped and grabbed it, rolled, and came up with it just as the dragon blasted another stream of fire at her. Again, the shield stopped it, and again she had to discard the flaming shield.

This time, instead of snapping at her, the dragon saw that Hiccup was closer, and selected him as its next target. It took two steps toward him, and during those two steps, she turned her axe in her hand, leaped at the dragon with a cry, and hit it full-force in the head with the flat of the blade. The blow stunned it, but it took three more such blows before the creature dropped unconscious to the floor.

The crowd erupted in cheers, which quickly became a chant of "Kill â€" it! Kill â€" it!" Hiccup limped away to the entrance, which his very angry father was holding open, leaving her alone in the ring with the knocked-out dragon.

She stared at it. Its first thought had been escape, not attack. It was helpless now. She looked up at her cheering fans. She raised her axe for the killing blow. She stopped.

She looked at the dragon again. "I did this." She put her axe down.

The crowd's cheers subsided almost immediately, replaced with stunned silence. "What's she doing?" someone asked.

"Everyone, listen!" she shouted. "You have to hear this!"

"The fight is over," Stoick shouted back. "Do what you came here to do!"

"No!" she retorted, amazed at her own audacity. "They aren't what we think they are. We don't have to kill them!"

"I said this fight is _over!_" Stoick bellowed. He advanced on the unconscious dragon, eyes blazing, raising his war hammer to finish what Astrid had started.

She stepped between him and his intended victim, weaponless, intimidated by his size and rage, but somehow sure she was right.

"Out of my way," he ordered.

"No, Dad!" Hiccup limped over and stood beside Astrid. "She's right. We don't have to kill them." He looked even more frightened than she did.

Stoick stared down at them. He could have killed three Monstrous Nightmares in the time it took him to master his temper. Finally, he pointed at the dragon and bellowed to the rest of the Vikings, "Put it back with the others!"

In the moments before he half-dragged them off to the Great Hall, Astrid turned to Hiccup. "What you did back there was really stupid. Also very brave. Thank you."

_She said something nice to me! _"Thanks, Astrid," he replied. "Famous last words."

3. Chapter 3

I Won This Thing Chapter 3

The two teens stumbled into the half-darkness of the Great Hall, feeling stunned and afraid. For Astrid, everything had finally started going so right, and now it had turned upside-down in a matter of moments. For Hiccup, he knew he had crossed some kind of line with his father, and this was much worse than the usual Hiccup mess.

"We had a deal!" Stoick bellowed. "It's not easy for a village this size to feed those devils and house them. It costs us when our blacksmith takes time away from his work to train you. We put a lot into your training, and we expect results! We expect warriors! Not... this!" He waved his hands at them.

"You just gestured to all of both of us," Hiccup sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Sir, I'm sorry!" Astrid began. "I know we had a deal, but that was before... oh, everything is so messed up!"

"Please," Hiccup begged, "take this out on us, be mad at us, but please don't hurt any more dragons!"

"The dragons?" Stoick roared. "That's what you're worried about? Not all the people they've killed?"

"They just protect themselves!" Astrid protested. "They're not dangerous!"

"They've... killed... hundreds of us!" Stoick bellowed.

"And we've killed thousands of them!" Hiccup shouted back, his voice pale and thin but just as angry as his father. "They defend themselves, that's all!"

Stoick clearly wasn't listening, so Astrid stepped in front of him. "They raid us because they have to! If they don't bring enough food back, they'll be eaten themselves! There's something else on their island. It's a dragon like â€œ"

"Their island!" Stoick's terrible eyes burned in on her, and she brought her hand to her mouth in her "oops" gesture. "So you've been to the nest!" His voice dropped to a whisper, but it still filled the room and drove her back a step.

"Did I say 'nest'?" she asked in a feeble attempt to wiggle out of this. It seemed that whatever she said, it only made things worse.

"How did you find it?" he demanded. Now Hiccup stepped in front of her, and took the two-handed shove on the shoulders that Stoick had intended for Astrid.

"No, we didn't, Toothless did..." He was stammering in fear. "Only a dragon can find the island!"

"And what, exactly, is a Toothless?" his father demanded, grabbing his son by a lapel with his huge hand.

Just when I thought I couldn't possibly make things any worse. "Oh, gods, now I've done it... He's a dragon, Dad. A special dragon. He's a â€œ"

"And he found their island?" At that, he released his son. He seemed to looking at something many miles away. It was plain that the wheels in his head were turning, and there was no question where they were headed.

"No, sir, it's not what you think!" Astrid tried to get his attention. "You don't know what you're up against! It's like nothing you've ever seen!" He pushed her aside roughly, forgetting the honor that Viking men had to show to women, even young ones.

"Dad, please! I promise you, you can't win this one!" Hiccup made one last desperate effort to get his father's attention. "Dad, no! For once in your life, would you please listen to me!"

The big man reached back and pushed his son away hard, sending him flying. He collided with Astrid, and they both fell to the floor in a tangled heap. They stared at the chief, more shocked than hurt. He turned and glared at them, huge and threatening, his eyes filled with hate. "You've thrown your lot in with them, both of you!" He fixed his eyes on Astrid. "You're not a Viking!" He turned to Hiccup. "And you're not my son." He turned away and slammed the huge doors behind him. They heard him bellow, "Ready the ships!"

They didn't know whether to stare at the door, each other, or the floor. It didn't seem to matter much.

They had stood on the high platform and watched the fleet sail away. Every warrior in Berk was on those ships. Even their four teen-aged friends were on this fleet.

"About the young dragon trainers," Gobber had asked Stoick. "We didn't technically have a winner this year, so how are we going to handle it?"

"Bring the ones who didn't disgrace themselves," Stoick had growled. "That'll be their reward for acting like Vikings."

Four of those ships also carried very special cargo. Strapped to their decks, their mouths bound shut with heavy leather bands, were the four dragons used for dragon training. "They'll take us to the nest," Stoick had explained to his skeptical warriors. "One or two of them might give us a hard time, but I'm sure at least one of them won't. And once we've taken the nest and all the dragons have left, we won't need dragon training any more." The implications for those dragons' futures were clear.

Hiccup and Astrid stayed on that platform long after the last ship had sailed over the horizon. They hadn't said a word to each other in hours, and the silence was getting awkward. At last, just for the sake of saying something, Hiccup turned to her and said, "It's a mess."

She nodded sadly. "Between us, I think we've lost everything. My tribe..."

"My father," Hiccup added.

"My future," she continued.

"And mine," he nodded. "That about sums it up. At least I still have my best friend."

She swatted him in the arm; she was too depressed to work up the energy for a solid punch. "I never said I was that! Just because we're in the same boat, don't start getting all familiar with me."

"I meant Toothless," he said defensively, and sighed. "Why couldn't I have killed that dragon when I found him in the woods? It would have been better for everyone."

"Yup. I would have done it," she agreed. "So why didn't you?"

"Astrid, we are in the same boat," he said. "And I just don't feel like putting up my usual sarcastic front. Not here, not now. Not with you."

"I tried to kill him, but I couldn't. No, that's not true. I wouldn't. And I wouldn't kill him because he looked as frightened as I was. I looked at him, and I saw myself."

"I'm glad he didn't get caught up in all this," she said, looking out to sea. "I bet those other dragons are really frightened now. What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Probably something stupid."

"Good, but we've already done that, and then some."

His face showed the first spark of life since she'd entered the ring. "Then something crazy. Come on!" He took off, hobbling as fast as his bad ankle would let him.

"That's more like it!" she grinned as she jogged beside him.

4. Chapter 4

****I Won This Thing** Chapter 4**

Stoick shook his head. The battle had been going well. The dragons had led them straight to the nest, just as Hiccup had suggested. Their catapults had breached the wall of the volcano, and all the dragons had fled without a fight. After all their many voyages, after all the men and materials lost in their war against the dragons, it almost seemed too easy.

Then one more dragon came out, the mother of all dragons, and everything went from good to horrible in moments. Now their catapults had been crushed into kindling, their ships were in flames, the men were scattered and running for their lives, and if there was anything left that hadn't gone wrong, Stoick didn't want to know what it might be.

Gobber was in the process of disobeying an order to help the men get away. "I think I'll stay, just in case you're thinking of doing something crazy."

"I can buy them a few minutes if I give that thing something to hunt!" Stoick growled. He felt he was to blame for this disaster; if his men were bound for Valhalla, he would lead them.

"Then I can double that time," the grizzled old blacksmith grinned. They clasped hands once more, old soldiers on their last ride together, and charged at the monster, shouting and waving their weapons to get its attention. When Stoick hurled a sharpened stake at its face, they succeeded. It took an incredulous look at them, reared up, prepared to wipe them off the face of the earth...

And then they heard a familiar rising whistle that could only mean one thing. "Night Fury?" Stoick wondered out loud.

"Get down!" Gobber shouted out of habit. They heard the innocent "pffft" sound, saw the blue flash, and the giant dragon's head was enveloped in a fireball. It forgot all about the chief and the smith, and tried to find what had just shot it.

The black dragon shot past its giant antagonist and made a quick sweep of the battlefield. The Vikings below froze in astonishment as they stared upward. None of them had ever seen a Night Fury before. They had never seen a dragon with human riders, either, and this dragon had two of them. Hiccup was buckled into his saddle, and Astrid was clinging to him for dear life. This ride wasn't quite as violent as the spin cycle she'd endured when she first rode

Toothless, but it was no romantic flight, either.

She looked all around at the men, the beach, the huge dragon, the ships... "There!" she pointed. "Those are our dragons!" Toothless swept around and slowed down as he overflew the flaming war vessels. She carefully let go of Hiccup and dropped to the deck of the nearest ship. She looked up at Hiccup and shouted, "Go!"

This ship had the Deadly Nadder captive on it. When it saw her, it desperately tried to pull away; it probably recognized her from dragon training. But its chains gave it no room to move.

"Don't be afraid!" she tried to soothe it. "I want to help!" She had to move quickly; the ship was burning and might sink into oblivion soon. The dragon was frightened and gave her no help. At last, she jumped up, caught the leather strap that held its mouth shut, and pulled it off.

The dragon stared at her. If dragon facial expressions were anything in the least like human expressions, it was totally astonished at what she had just done. She found a crowbar and tried to loosen the chains that held the dragon to the deck. And tried again. She lacked the sheer mass she needed for leverage! She desperately threw herself against the crowbar, willing the chain to come out of the deck.

"If you're planning on getting eaten, I'd definitely go with the Gronckle," came a familiar voice from behind her. Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, and Snotlout were standing in a line on the shore near where the ships were beached. It was Fishlegs who had spoken.

"Astrid, what are you doing?" Snotlout asked.

"If we don't set these dragons free, they'll be killed!" she shouted back.

"Uhhh... isn't that the idea?" Ruffnut replied.

"Wait a minute," Fishlegs said. "You saved a dragon, and you got kicked out of the tribe in disgrace for it. Now you want to save some more dragons, and you want us to help, so we can get thrown out too? Something here does not make sense."

"Yeah," added Tuffnut. "Give us one good reason why we ought to do something that stupid."

"LOOK OUT!" she screamed. The giant dragon was ponderously turning around, trying to keep an eye on the speeding Night Fury, and its heavy clubbed tail was swinging this way. They all ducked, including the dragons; the tail missed them, but knocked down all the masts and spread the fires even further.

"That thing is going to kill all of us if we can't stop it," Astrid said urgently. "We can't fight it, but dragons can. Look!" She pointed just as Toothless fired another fireball into the head of the leviathan. His shots didn't seem to be doing it any real harm, but they were keeping it off balance.

"Oh, like these dragons are just going to let us ride them into

battle?" Tuffnut scoffed.

"_Hiccup_ is riding one," Astrid pointed out. "If we let them free, they might be thankful. And if we don't, the only one who can save us is _Hiccup_." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. But they had the desired effect.

"I'm with you, Astrid!" Snotlout shouted. He leaped onto the burning ship, leaned into the crowbar, and the first chain popped loose. He undid the other one a second later, and the Deadly Nadder was free. The twins followed his example and were soon prying away at the chains that held the Hideous Zippleback, and Fishlegs was trying to free the Gronckle. Snotlout jumped back on the beach and ran down to the ship that held the Monstrous Nightmare.

"Okay, dragon," Astrid said to the blue beast that towered over her. "We don't have any weapons." She spread her open hands; the dragon turned its head to keep one eye on her. "We're not here to hurt you. We want to get rid of that big dragon, and... I sure hope you understand some of this! If you want to get rid of it, too, then we have to help each other. Can I... can I ride on you, like Hiccup is riding on Toothless?" She pointed at the speeding black dragon, then back at the Nadder.

The dragon looked at her, then at the giant. It bent down to look at her more closely. She had been this close to dragons many times. But she'd always had her axe in her hands. It wasn't just a weapon; in a way, it gave her something to hide behind. Now there was no place to hide.

Hesitantly, she reached up and touched the Nadder's neck. The dragon flinched, but didn't pull away. It was odd â€" she had spent so much time in the ring with this particular dragon, and had never actually touched it! Its scales were dry and firm, but flexible, like hard leather. She stroked the neck and face; she seemed to recall Hiccup doing something like this in the ring. The dragon obviously enjoyed it.

'_The world has gone crazy,'_ she thought. '_Hiccup is fighting to save the tribe, and I'm standing on a burning ship, petting a dragon. What next â€" Thor shows up wearing a pink dress?_'

"Okay, dragon, we've got work to do," she said out loud. "If we're going to fight that thing, we have to work together. Can I ride you?" The dragon blinked, then lowered itself and bent its neck down, inviting her to climb up and ride it.

Astrid thought she'd faced a moment of truth when she faced the Monstrous Nightmare in the ring. But that was a walk in the meadow compared to what she was about to do now. Flying on Toothless with Hiccup was one thing; Hiccup _knew_ what he was doing, and Toothless was intelligent and a little bit friendly. All she had to do was hang on. If she climbed onto this dragon, she'd be on her own, taking her first flight into a pitched battle against hideous odds, and she didn't know if this Nadder was smart, friendly, brave, or trustworthy. She was placing her life in this dragon's hands. "Paws," she corrected herself.

Circumstances made the decision for her. The fires from the burning ship had surrounded her; the only way out was up. She stepped onto

the dragon's knee and settled herself on its back. "I'm ready," she said.

The dragon spread its wings, gathered itself, and sprang into the air. She would have fallen off if she hadn't ridden Toothless and knew to brace herself. The Nadder rose above the flames; she pointed it down the line of ships so she could see how the others were doing. Fishlegs had freed the Gronckle, which was beating its tiny wings in anticipation of freedom. The twins were almost done releasing the two-headed Zippleback, but Snotlout was having trouble. The chains on the Monstrous Nightmare were extra-thick and he couldn't pry them loose.

"I know! Snotlout, step back!" she shouted. He was baffled for a moment; he wasn't used to her voice coming down from above him. But he stepped away from the big dragon. "Okay," she said to her Nadder, "can you burn through those chains? Fire? Can you understand me?"

Either the dragon could understand, or it had the same idea on its own. The sparking, white-hot flame from the Nadder hit the first chain, and melted through it in about three seconds. As soon as the Nadder recharged, it sliced the second chain, and the Nightmare was loose.

"Astrid! What do I do?" Snotlout shouted. "How do I ride this thing?"

"Yeah, how?" Ruffnut and Fishlegs echoed.

Astrid realized that the others were looking to her for leadership. Before she could become a warrior, she had to become a dragon trainer.

And she had to figure it out fast.

5. Chapter 5

****I Won This Thing**** Chapter 5

Astrid was barely in control of her own dragon. Four of her closest friends were looking to her for guidance on how to ride dragons of their own, as they stood on the decks of burning ships, while the largest dragon in the world went on a rampage in the background. She glanced at Hiccup, streaking around the battlefield on his own beloved dragon, and for the first time in her life, she envied him.

"Okayâ€¦uhâ€¦u-umâ€¦you have to be nice to them," she began hesitantly. "Show them you don't have a weapon. Say nice things."

"How do you do that?" Ruffnut and Tuffnut asked in unison.

"Well, you, uh..."

'Think fast, Astrid. What would Hiccup do?' Then another thought hit her. 'Your tribe is facing the worst disaster in its history, and the best you can do is try to copy Hiccup the Useless?'

"I could do worse," she snapped to herself. Snotlout gave her an odd look; the others didn't hear her.

"Just talk to it, like you'd talk to a child that's lost and scared," she called down to them. "Tell it you want to help, but it has to help also. Don't make any sudden movements. Hiccup did it, I just did it, so you can do it too."

That last line was a challenge that Snotlout couldn't refuse. He got right into the Monstrous Nightmare's face, laid a hand on its nose, and started saying nice things to it. Then he realized what he was doing, and froze up in terror. Luckily, the huge dragon had decided it liked him. Its purr of contentment was a low rumble that Astrid could feel as well as hear.

Fishlegs had no difficulty with the Gronckle; they seemed to understand each other with little effort. The twins had some problems, which was expected any time they had to cooperate. Fortunately, their dragon had two heads, so they could each ride one without competing with each other.

"Climb onto its neck and hang on as tight as you can!" she shouted, in a hurry. The enormous dragon had decided to ignore Hiccup and Toothless, and chase the Viking army instead. She and her friends had to do something to distract it. Hesitantly, the four dragons rose into the air. It was the first time they'd flown freely since they were captured for dragon training; except for the Gronckle, they flew somewhat weakly. As they got closer to the monstrous dragon, its true size became apparent, and Astrid wondered if they could do anything at all to it.

"What are we supposed to do?" Tuffnut called, echoing her thoughts.

"Get in its face. Distract it. Get it to stop chasing our warriors," she shouted.

"So, if it chases us instead, that's better?" Ruffnut asked, not at all convinced.

"We're on dragons!" Astrid shot back. "We're fast. We can dodge that thing better than people on foot. We can shoot fire, too, if we can get that across to the dragons."

"Yeah," Snotlout said. He was starting to enjoy this. "Ha hah! Dragons!"

Hiccup wished he'd had more time to learn about Night Furies before he had to ride one into battle for the life of the tribe. In particular, he wished he knew what Toothless' shot limit was. The giant dragon was trying to pursue Berk's warriors, and he had no way to distract it except to shoot at it. That might not be a problem, except he was forming a plan to kill the huge thing, and he would need a lot of shots to make that happen. If he used up all of Toothless' fire down here, he couldn't win.

'No one has ever fought one of these things before,' he thought,
'so whatever stupid mistake I make, at least it'll be
original.'

He caught motion out of the corner of his eye. Four dragons were rising from the burning longships, and it looked like they had human riders. "She's up!" he shouted to Toothless. He watched as Astrid led the dragons in a line across the monster dragon's nose, distracting it for a moment. When it returned to its pursuit of the Vikings, the dragon riders circled its head, shouting to keep its attention away from the fleeing warriors. Snotlout even got his Nightmare to shoot some fire at it.

That was a mistake. The monster shook its head and unleashed a blast of flame as big around as a war vessel. Snotlout's dragon dodged it, just barely, but Snotlout fell off the dragon's neck. The Zippleback behind him dove and caught him, but it was now overloaded and the Nightmare had no rider. That left Fishlegs on the Gronckle and Astrid on the Nadder.

Fishlegs didn't last much longer; the huge creature swung its head back and hit the Gronckle a glancing blow. It spiraled to the ground, half-stunned. As it scraped to a halt on the rocks, Fishlegs shouted, "I got away!" Then the Gronckle up-ended and landed on top of him. "Less away!"

These sacrifices were not wasted.

While the enormous dragon was distracted, Toothless had been able to gain some height. Now he spun and dove again, building up speed as he also built up an extra-powerful fireball. It impacted the giant at the base of its neck and hit it so hard, it knocked the monster to the ground. It looked up in inhuman rage, spread its wings, and pursued the black dragon that would not stop harassing it.

"It can fly!" Hiccup nodded, not sure if this was such a good idea. Then he realized how quickly the giant was gaining on him. "Go, Toothless!" he urged his mount, and the Night Fury surged forward. The Vikings on the ground were treated to the spectacle of a Night Fury fighting on their side as it streaked across the battlefield with Hiccup on its back, hotly pursued by the largest dragon they never wanted to imagine.

Hiccup looked up at the clouds. "Okay, Toothless. Time to disappear!" he ordered, adjusted Toothless' tail, and they shot upwards. The adjustment was painful; his sprained left ankle still hurt. The monster dragon followed them. Astrid watched them and urged her own dragon toward the clouds as well. She didn't know what Hiccup had in mind, but, being Hiccup, he'd probably need help.

6. Chapter 6

****I Won This Thing**** Chapter 6

When Astrid and her dragon reached the base of the clouds, the giant dragon had already disappeared inside them, pursuing Hiccup and Toothless. The Nadder was nervous about going in there, and Astrid couldn't blame it.

They heard a "whump" and saw a flash in the clouds above them. "Go towards that!" she exclaimed. The blue dragon squawked and flapped toward the location of the flash. A few anxious seconds later, they

saw another flash, and now they heard the basso scream of the monster dragon.

Then they broke into a gap in the clouds, and they could see it.

It was flapping hard, swiveling its head in every direction, roaring out its frustration because it couldn't strike back at its much smaller tormentor. They heard the rising whistle of a diving Night Fury; for a moment, they saw it against the dark clouds; then an electric blue fireball shot out, and another flash struck the monster.

"Go that way!" she directed the dragon. The Nadder was grateful to duck into the cover of the cloud layer again. But they wouldn't be there for long. Astrid had noticed that Toothless was shooting holes in the giant's wings.

Two can play at that game, she decided.

She saw three more flashes hit the giant as she closed the distance. When she thought she was close enough, she turned the dragon towards the monster. They came out of the clouds just above it. "_Fire_, right there!" she pointed. The Nadder flamed without hesitation, and its brilliant flame ripped a long, jagged hole in the enormous dragon's wing.

Evidently, _that_ hurt. The huge wing flinched â€" right toward them. The Nadder was unable to dodge it, and the wing dealt them a terrible blow. The dragon was knocked away, and Astrid was sent flying.

Above them, Toothless was looking at Hiccup apologetically. _He must be out of fire_, Hiccup thought. _We needed just one more good hole!_ His dragon's fires would recharge quickly, but they might not have enough time for that. Then he saw the brilliant light of the Nadder's flame carving up their enemy's wing surface, and he saw the Nadder get hit and part company with its rider.

"Dive, Toothless!" he ordered, and the Night Fury folded his wings and dove. The giant saw them and dove after them.

Astrid fell. She _knew_ she was going to die. Maybe her last action had redeemed her in some way, and her disgrace wouldn't stick to her family name. Her only regret was not having gotten to know Hiccup better. He obviously had courage that no one else suspected, even if he did almost spoil her victory in dragon training.

She heard that familiar rising whistle; evidently, Hiccup and Toothless were making another attack. But it kept rising, louder and louder. She glanced upward â€" and there was Toothless, teeth out and wings folded, plunging straight toward her. Just behind him was the gaping maw of the giant dragon, ready to swallow them all.

As the Night Fury swept by her, he reached out one foot, caught her leg, and pulled her in close to himself. She heard Hiccup anxiously ask, "Did you get her?" Toothless looked under himself for a moment, saw her smile at him, and smiled back. Then they heard a sound like a teapot beginning to boil. The enormous dragon was preparing for a fire shot!

"Hold, Toothless... _now!_" Hiccup shouted. The black dragon spun and

shot one last fireball into the mouth of the giant, igniting its fire gases just before it could expel and ignite them itself.

At that moment, the giant saw that they were rushing toward the earth at a terrifying rate. It opened its wings wide to slow itself down. But the many holes in its wings rendered them useless. With a despairing scream, the giant slammed face-first into the ground. Its burning gases ignited, and the resulting fireball could be seen miles away.

Toothless desperately tried to get clear. He was slightly overloaded, carrying both Hiccup and Astrid, and her weight on his underside threw his balance off. They dodged through the forest of spines on the dying monster's back, but its great clubbed tail was too big to avoid. Toothless tried to take the blow on himself, but Astrid's head struck the tail and she was jarred out of his arms. Hiccup didn't take the impact directly, but the force of the blow threw him out of his saddle and knocked him unconscious.

A blue speck descended from the clouds. The Nadder had seen its rider and dove, disregarding its own safety. It caught Astrid by the arms with its back legs, spread its wings, and hauled clear of the burning gases that covered the land below. It took a last glance back and saw Toothless, flapping desperately to catch Hiccup before he fell into the inferno.

Both of them plunged into the fire.

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The ride home was slow and somber. The Vikings had pieced together a few leaky ships from the ruins of their fleet. Those ships would have to take several trips to bring everyone home. The wounded were sent home on the first trip.

On the leading ship, two small bodies rested on litters, side by side. Astrid's head and face were heavily bandaged, and Hiccup's ruined left leg was wrapped in cloths that had to be changed often. Lying on the deck between them, a battered black dragon kept vigil. A blue dragon circled overhead.

Astrid regained consciousness after a few hours. Her first words were "My head..."

"Aye, that head of yours is gonna hurt for a bit." She recognized Gobber's voice. "And, when it's all done, ye won't be quite so pretty as ye were. But Stoick says you've earned the right to be a warrior, so ye're back in his good graces. Maybe that'll help ye feel better."

She remembered her own words from dragon training "Yeah, it's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

No one ever told her the price people paid for those scars.

"What about Hiccup?" she asked.

"Well... he took some bad knocks, lassie, and his leg is a mess. Not the worst I've ever seen, but pretty bad. We're gonna have to take some of it off. Maybe ye can help us when the time comes. His scaly

friend, here, may think we're tryin' to hurt the lad, and since you've trained some dragons, maybe you could keep 'im from killin' the rest of us?"

"If I can help, I'll try."

And when they strapped Hiccup down and pulled out the saw, she strengthened herself, found Toothless' head by touch, and desperately tried to convince him that they had to do this for Hiccup's well-being. He snarled and lashed the deck with his tail, but he didn't hurt anyone. She was grateful for the snarling; it drowned out the sounds of what Gobber was doing.

"Thank ye, lassie. Yer help was just what we needed. Get some rest now." The smith's grisly work was done. She felt her way back to her litter and lay down. After a while, Gobber removed the bandages from the right side of her face, so she could see. But she couldn't relax.

Around sunset, Hiccup stirred, briefly rising to semi-consciousness. "â€|Leg hurts," he murmured. "Sprained ankleâ€| stupid... had toâ€| s-save Astridâ€|"

She rolled over and watched him in the waning sunlight. His chest barely rose and fell. He had risked everything, and given much, for a village that had never done anything but reject him. He would never sprain his left ankle for her againâ€|

"I am a warrior," she told herself. "I am a Viking. I am a shieldmaiden. Shieldmaidens do not cry."

But sometimes, in the dark of the night, with only an unconscious boy and the vigilant black and blue dragons as witnesses, even a shieldmaiden had to cry a little.

7. Chapter 7

****I Won This Thing** Chapter 7**

****A/N Thank you to my beta reader, ChampionSayn, for helping make this story a lot better.****

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The next two weeks were a constellation of highs and lows for Astrid.

When the wild dragons realized that Berk was now a safe place for them, many of them moved in. People wanted help making friends with them, and needed help understanding them and dealing with their reptilian ways. The teens, and Astrid in particular, became the town's dragon experts, and were soon busier with dragons than they were with their chores.

Astrid suggested to Stoick that they turn the dragon-training ring into a Dragon Training Academy, with full-time dragon trainers to help the village and all its citizens, human and reptilian. He considered the matter, and agreed! There was no question whom the leader of this new Academy should be. Astrid accepted the honor and

the responsibility with humility, for the most part. The only thing that bothered her was that she didn't feel like she won anything; there was no serious competition for the role, no matter how qualified Snotlout said he was. Her only possible competitor lay unconscious in bed for those two weeks.

She visited Hiccup daily, two or three times a day if she could. Toothless never left his side, and Stoick also spent as much time with him as he could. On one of those visits, he actually apologized to her (and, by implication, to Hiccup) for his words in the Great Hall. Hiccup had other visitors as well — Gobber the Belch, the village healer, and various well-wishers from the town who would stop by, say some encouraging words, shake their heads, and leave.

It was a close thing. For several days, Hiccup ran a high fever, and the healer repeatedly checked his leg for signs of infection. But his thin, still, stubborn body fought back, and his normal color returned. His breathing was steady, his temperature normal. Yet he remained unconscious.

There was one afternoon, with only Toothless as a witness, when she clutched his shoulders and wet his face with her tears. "I'd give up all my victories if you'd just wake up!" she begged him. That was when she realized that she no longer thought of him as a competitor for the glories she craved. Maybe, she decided, there are things in life that aren't prizes to be fought over, but are still worth having.

She had no tears for her own loss. She wasn't inclined to dwell on it anyway. That's how it is when you're a Viking, she told herself. In a way, it was worth it, compared to what she'd gotten in return — her rank as a warrior, the esteem of the community, the headship of the new Academy, and Stormfly's pure devotion. Besides, it was a lot less severe than Hiccup's injury, so she couldn't feel sorry for herself.

When he finally regained consciousness after those two long weeks, Toothless was his only companion. The dragon had refused to be parted from him, even to eat, and so Toothless was the one who helped him mourn the loss of his leg, and helped him to take his first faltering steps to the door.

Once people noticed him in the doorway, a crowd quickly gathered to welcome him back. His best welcome-home gift was before his eyes — a town that had become a dragon's nest. Flying reptiles of all kinds and colors were walking the streets and resting on the roofs of the buildings, peacefully sharing the town with the people who used to be their mortal enemies. Behind him, Toothless looked around in silent approval.

As his father and neighbors greeted him excitedly, he noticed a blue Nadder striding toward his house. The slightly-built rider dismounted and ran up to him. Everyone else went quiet as the town's two heroes met for the first time since the battle. They all remembered the strong rivalry between them during dragon training. How would they share the glory for the battle they'd won together, and for the changes their example had brought to the town? Was another battle about to break out here?

The first thing he noticed was her smile. She had never smiled at him

before, not like _that_. Then he looked a little higher. The bruises that had discolored half of her face had mostly faded, but a few of them remained, along with other evidence of having taken a hard hit to the head. On the left side of her face, partly concealed by her falling bangs, was an angry red scar... and an eye patch.

She saw him staring; she looked at the ground. For the first time, her injury bothered her. "I'm really ugly now, aren't I?" she asked self-consciously.

"No! I still think you're beautiful!" He stopped himself, but there was no mistaking what he'd almost said.

"You can't seriously call this beautiful!" she exclaimed, pointing to her patch. When he nodded, she hit him in the arm. "_That's_ for lying!"

"Ow! Okay, maybe it isn't actually beautiful, but it is!" She grabbed him by the shirt and kissed him. She meant for it to be a light peck on the lips, but her depth perception was off due to having only one eye, and she wound up kissing him hard.

"...I could get used to it," he sighed, dazed.

A few of the villagers gasped. A kiss like that in public was almost a marriage proposal. _That might not be such a bad idea,_ she decided, and smiled at him again. She'd talk to her parents about him later.

They went flying that afternoon. The other teens had firmly befriended the dragons they rode in battle, and they had formed a sort of flying club. Today's flight quickly degenerated into a race between Astrid and Hiccup. Toothless was normally the faster dragon by far, but he hadn't eaten, slept, or flown much in the past two weeks, and he and Hiccup were straining to stay ahead of Stormfly and Astrid.

"Stay out of my way!" she shouted at him. "I'm winning this thing!"

Okay, so maybe she still felt a _little_ competitive.

****THE END****

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file.